

Audienceship and (Non)Laughter in the Stand-up Comedy of Steve Martin

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Abstract

In an attempt to tease out the dynamics of the more often discussed overarching performer/audience relationship in live stand-up; to explore the conditions of intra-audience agency; and, further, and most significantly, to explore the pleasures of the medium, it would seem appropriate to turn to the point of *laughter*, that physical and most gratifying manifestation of both intra-audience and performer/audience relations. A concrete marker of the crucial bonds or contracts promoted and exploited in stand-up, laughter is a most fruitful focal point for analysis. As such, it is my intention here to examine moments of laughter and, more importantly, (non)laughter, in the recorded live comedy of Steve Martin - a performer whose unique status as the first 'rock 'n' roll stand-up comedian'. Specifically, here, I look to certain types of gags that recur across Martin's work, from the intimate gigs relatively early on in his career, to the huge stadium gigs at the height of his fame; and illustrate how an intriguing range of moments of (non)laughter - spanning stunned silence through to resounding cheering - may reveal much of the audience's crucial role in the creative process. Rather than mere (negative) response, I argue, these moments of (non)laughter are extremely telling signifiers of intra-audience dynamics, or 'audienceship': affirmative components of the performance itself, they serve to underline the pleasurable and powerful sense of belonging to the group that is so acute across Martin's career.

Keywords: Audienceship; Steve Martin; laughter; stand-up.

The existing criticism on stand-up comedy is united in recognizing the sense of bonding and interaction it promotes (see especially Borns, 1987; Carter, 1989; Rutter, 1997; and Stone, 1997). For sure, the live and informal nature of the comedian's performance, as well as the venue itself, can facilitate a performer/audience relationship unlike that found in most conventional theatre: in stand-up, personalized address and candid geniality intended to strike up a rapport with the audience combines with a relaxed, social environment to

generate a distinctly free-wheeling, 'organic' art form (Borns, 1987: 16). Commonly perceived by the criticism as part of the creative process, the stand-up audience's consolidated presence, their vital responses and actions are seen to help feed a performance which is 'as reactive as it is active' (*ibid*). Auslander highlights the typical concerns of writing on live performance and audiences when he remarks on 'the "energy" that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event, and the "community" that live performance is often said to create between performers and spectators' (Auslander, 1999: 2). Though he deems them 'clichés', notions of 'energy' and 'community' seem to garner particular truth in the specific case of stand-up comedy. Perhaps even more so than the rock and pop audiences Auslander discusses, the stand-up comedy audience is crucial in shaping the event. Music audiences may sing along, even 'take over' temporarily as the singer extends the microphone toward them. Yet stand-up may be even more dialogic: audience and comedian sharing both a physical and a diegetic space, the performance is more than that which unfolds onstage: it is that which unravels at the intersection of audience and comedian.

Less pronounced in the existing commentary is a sustained focus on *intra-audience* bonding, or what I am calling 'audienceship'. Indeed, the (secondary) collective relationship with the comic performer depends, first and foremost, upon the (primary) relationships between individual audience members. Now, so fluctuant and variable are these intra-audience relations that any attempts to analyze them, particularly given the limitations of the textual analysis approach I take here, are necessarily tentative. Yet to omit to offer them up for examination, to fail to try to unpack them, I would argue, would seem to undervalue the role of the audience; and, consequently, to oversimplify the audience's overarching relationship with the performer. A wholly social experience, the stand-up gig not only promotes but positively thrives on a complex nexus of intra-audience relations; relations, it will become clear in the case of Steve Martin, that are significant precisely *because* they are fluctuant and variable.

This paper has three primary aims: to tease out the dynamics of the more often discussed performer/audience relationship in live stand-up; to explore the conditions of the audience's agency; and, further, and most significantly, to explore the pleasures of the medium. To achieve these it would seem appropriate to turn to the point of *laughter*, that physical and most gratifying manifestation of both intra-audience and performer/audience relations. A concrete marker of the crucial bonds or contracts promoted and exploited in stand-up, laughter is a most fruitful focal point for analysis. In fact, since it facilitates such a tangible and immediate relationship between comic performance and laughter, stand-up may well provide one of the most fertile environments for laughter study. After all, with the likelihood of instant vocal appreciation from the audience, the comic performance feeds off the laughter, becoming at once its cause and effect. As comedian Mike Nichols puts it:

[stand-up is] the only kind of creative life in which the work and the reward come at exactly the same moment. In every other kind of work, even the theatre, the reward comes at least an act later. Mostly, it comes months, or even years, later or not at all. (Gopnik, 1993: 102)

Given its crucial place within stand-up, it is my intention here to examine moments of laughter and, more importantly, (non)laughter, in the recorded live comedy of Steve Martin – a performer whose unique status as the first ‘rock ‘n’ roll stand-up comedian’ (playing to audiences of 25,000, and attracting the kind of cult following more akin to that of rock bands)¹ surely renders his work ripe for discussion of audience response. Though nowadays better known for increasingly ‘mature’ roles in films such as *Shopgirl* (2005) and *It’s Complicated* (2009), Martin was a significant, if incongruous, force on the stand-up scene in the 1970s: famous for an eclectic mix of banjo-playing, balloon animals and silly prop gags, his performance seemingly bucked the trend of social and political relevance pedalled by contemporaries like Richard Pryor and George Carlin.

Specifically, here, I look to certain comedy structures, most significantly gags, that recur across Martin’s work, from the intimate gigs relatively early on in his career to the huge stadium gigs at the height of his fame, and illustrate how an intriguing range of moments of (non)laughter – spanning stunned silence through to resounding cheering – may reveal much of the audience’s crucial role in the creative process. Rather than mere negative response these moments of (non)laughter are, I argue, extremely telling signifiers of intra-audience dynamics: as affirmative components of the performance itself, they serve to underline the pleasurable and powerful sense of belonging to the group that is so acute across Martin’s career.

I should note before proceeding that I have never had the pleasure of seeing Martin perform live, and he has long since given up stand-up. As such, my discussion of his stand-up reception is based on the actual audiences we can see and, much more often, *hear* in recordings of his gigs, many of these taking place at the height of his career in the late 1970s. While, then, I proceed here primarily at the level of textual analysis (observing and interpreting Martinian gags and their affect), the recording of these performances inevitably raises questions around mediatization. Though not wishing to oversimplify things, even when a secondary audience views these gigs, Martin’s stand-up may retain some of its raw, naked appeal, for the camera in these recordings tends to be unobtrusive (the frontal-staging of the solo performance, in contrast, say, to the complex staging of an ensemble theatre production, demanding relatively minimal reframing and editing), and, fortuitously, the crucial indicator of laughter remains audible.² Interestingly, and in an exception to the commonly more static use of the camera, some of the Martin footage I refer to below, with its intermittent shots of the crowd, reveals privileged insight into the actual responses of a live audience. Such occurrences, by their very rarity, may seem of only limited value.

However, they do offer some confirmation of those actual physical responses that I have not only come to expect from Martin's performance, but that, crucially, are clearly provided for by, and inscribed within, his particular performance style. Indeed, and as I outline below, Martin's stand-up self-consciously assumes and positions an audience, with his very brand of anti-comedy anticipating and orchestrating a distinct and pleasurable Martinian comedy experience.

Approaching stand-up

It is clear that any attempt to evaluate stand-up comedy ought to make recourse to the physicality of the venue itself. For it is first and foremost the physical space of the stand-up venue and what is permitted in that space that has important ramifications for performer/audience relations and audienceship. While the dedicated comedy club is nowadays a fixture of most cities, it remains that many stand-up gigs, certainly on the amateur circuit, take place in modest and makeshift spaces where performer and audience are necessarily physically close to one another.³ As Rutter observes 'the amount of space that is marked out as the performer's in stand-up venues is minimal' (1997: 71). Moreover, and unlike in much theatre where the distant stage is more prominently lit and the audience is in darkness, stand-up lighting tends to be characterized by less contrast, with the performer able to make out his audience and the audience able to see one another.

From the very outset, then, the stand-up venue can provide for physical proximity conducive to performer/audience interaction, as well as crucial intra-audience activity. Further factors such as the presence of alcohol, as well as the seating in the venue, fuel the notion of a distinctly collective, informal experience, as likeminded audience members buy drinks in rounds and are often seated together around tables, able to share their responses as the performance unfolds.⁴ In fact, it is the very *lack* of this consolidated presence of the audience, and, thus, of intra-audience activity, I would argue, that renders recent so-called 'Twitter stand-up' a potentially unsatisfying comedy experience. Here, the overarching dialogue between comedian and audience is replaced by a string of one-liners and, at times, personalized exchanges between comedian and individual Tweeter (no doubt braver and more likely to heckle than any present audience member). Now, this throws up all kinds of questions around delivery and performance space, but, particularly, around the group dynamics of the medium. As Richardson notes in a review of Tony Cowards' 'gig' in 2010:

Cowards plans to introduce greater interaction into the shows as he settles into his run, but is already tweeting bespoke jokes for individuals on requested subjects and retweeting guest gags from other Fringe comics as a plug for their shows. (Richardson, 2010)

Such 'bespoking' of comedy may be 'Twitter wit' (referenced in the title of Richardson's review), but, lacking the defining audienceship promoted by the physical space of the gig, it

is certainly not stand-up as we know it. Somewhat synthesized exchanges displace the organic dialogue of stand-up, and the existence of that 'energy' Auslander questions in live performance may be proved here, precisely via its absence.

The stand-up venue, I would argue, is a vital determining factor in the creation of a truly social experience; an experience that is fully exploited once the gig gets underway. The performance purposefully addresses plurality over singularity: the audience is referred to collectively as 'you', the second person plural; the comedian urges them to sympathize with him using phrases like 'isn't that right?' and 'don't you think?'; and the frequent requirement for vocal participation feeds the notion of an integrated and participative audience. As such, the consolidated audience becomes partner to the comedian. And this is a relationship, it seems, dependant upon their very unity. As Rutter explains:

Stand-up consolidates individuals in the audience into adopting a single role within the communication process. The audience expect, and are expected, to act and react as a single body as much as possible and discourage individual actions or deviations. (Rutter: 118)

Likewise, Marc describes how:

anonymous members of the assembly....spontaneously merge into a single emotional organism capable of reacting uniformly to the metaphor, wisdom, and worldview of one appointed personality' (Marc, 1980: 14).

For all the apparent recognition of activity, of unity and bonding within the performer/audience partnership, there is a troubling hierarchy of power, here; and this is one that seems to dismiss crucial intra-audience activity. With its use of religious terminology likening the gig to a sermon, accounts such as Marc's seem, rather simplistically, to pit the elevated and superior performer against an inevitably passive and submissive audience. Certainly, issues of authority and control are a common concern across the criticism; and, in a discussion that is entirely relevant to Martin's work, Stone usefully observes how power relations in stand-up are actually flexible and changing; more intricate and complex than much of the criticism suggests. She notes how comedian and audience, in fact, 'riff off each other, creating a frisson that heightens the power dynamic existing in all theatre – the actor at once commanding and naked' (Stone, 1997: xiii).

As I explain here, the audience do not necessarily respond to or identify with Martin in any straightforward manner that might signal a clear hierarchy between performer and audience; nor are they always the homogenous entity envisioned by many analysts. It is never Martin's intention that his audience come together to vicariously experience life through his performance. His comedy is not a 'cleansing' one, as Borns suggests; an

opportunity for the audience to 'relinquish [their] frustrated ids' (Borns, 1987: 17). Rather, Martin's is *anti-comedy*, for it is comedy of disconnection and disavowal that would seem to challenge perceptions about the roles of the comedian and his audience in stand-up, while to defying any clear-cut hierarchy of power relations, and, most crucially, laying bare the very special pleasures facilitated by the medium.

'Can you believe this guy?!': connecting in the face of absurdity

Some rare footage featuring on a 1974 special for Canadian television (though actually recorded in the Ice House in California) reveals Martin in a small and intimate venue where he and the audience are close to one another. Though it would seem to provide all the facilitators for bonding and identification we might expect from the stand-up gig, significantly, this is not the case. As I noted before, in many recordings of stand-up gigs the camera is a generally self-effacing one, as it functions as a means of preserving and occasionally highlighting, and rarely registers more than an omniscient viewpoint of the performance. In this instance, however, the camera is a usefully revealing one in terms of the secondary audience's experience, as framing and editing choices, here, accentuate diegetic audience dynamics for the pleasure of the absent audience (and, moreover, for the benefit of the analyst). For the most part Martin, dressed smartly in a black suit and white shirt with a black bow-tie, is framed in medium or long-shot on screen left, allowing the audience, seated around about him, to occupy more than two-thirds of the frame. Further, and by means of some quite probing intermittent mid-shots and close-ups of the crowd, we are given privileged insight into the actual live audience and their reactions. In fact, what makes this such a valuable document in terms of stand-up reception is that it reveals a whole range of physical and audible audience reactions, and, most fascinating, lots of silence. Thus we see audience members alternately look puzzled, remain silent, clap, shoot darting looks at one another and gaze on at Martin in wide-eyed bewilderment.

One of the most notable gags performed here involves Martin donning a novelty (and, ultimately, iconic) arrow-through-the-head. He begins:

You know, when I, I first started out, I realized I should put a little comedy into the act. You know, I was just playing the old banjo [motions playing the banjo], and, well, I don't really have a sense of humour so I hired some Hollywood comedy writers, and I paid 'em three thousand dollars and they wrote a fantastic piece of material for me, and, well, I'd like to do it for you right now. It's pretty funny. I think you're going to enjoy it.

At this, he turns away from the audience, slowly reaches for and pulls on the arrow-through-the-head, and then turns back to face the group expectantly. Tellingly, what ensues is a very noticeable and lingering silence; it is only belatedly and hesitantly that individuals laugh or exchange brief and unbelieving looks and commentary with one another. Although an

isolated laugh or two punctuates the beginning of his monologue (primarily as Martin mimes playing his banjo), for the most part the audience are silent, listening and watching on intently. The conversational, confessional discourse he initiates with 'you know' seems to draw them in, only to leave them stumped, left out on a limb, when he comes to produce the ridiculous prop. In a similar notable example he begins by ostentatiously holding out a paper napkin in front of the audience. In the manner of a magician he waves his hands and looks intently at the napkin as if summoning his magic powers. After a climactic pause and with a dramatic flourish, he places the napkin over his face. Then, after another conspicuous pause, he sticks his tongue through it. Once again, silence predominates before a smattering of laughter ensues.

What is apparent with these examples is that laughter is delayed because the build-up to the gag is exaggerated, for it is too big and too inappropriate for the weak pay-off that occurs. Ironic showmanship bearing only an excuse for a cheap gag, eventual, self-enforced laughter permits a sense of relief from the audience's astonishment. Clearly this is comedy of incongruity (wherein, as Kant outlines, expectation is reduced to nothing⁵), and the audience is responding accordingly; that is to say audience members laugh as they recognize the ironic juxtaposition of Martin's ridiculous actions and conventional speech. Yet, crucially, the strangeness, the inappropriateness of Martin's comedy seems to be realized slowly, if at all. While laughter here certainly conforms to the popularly held belief of tension release Stone (1997) adopts a useful sneeze/laughter correlation in this respect, underscoring laughter as both involuntary release and as positive rupturing of tension), it is the audience's belated response that is so intriguing: the lapse in performance before the onset of laughter underlines that it is through the audience, on the surface, at least, that the all-important tension is broken. Contrast this with the 'conventional' comedian's delivery of the punch-line which acts as a cue for the audience to laugh, and we may begin to grasp the transgressive nature of Martin's relationship with his audience. Thus, after donning the arrow-through-the-head, it is in part Martin's relative *inaction* that stuns the audience into momentary silence. So he waits silently, simply looking from one side of the audience to the other before he motions somewhat arrogantly with his hands and asks 'So, you think it was worth three grand?'. In a sense, this question *is* a punch-line and it is certainly greeted with the most immediate laughter so far. Yet, in serving merely to reinforce what I would argue is the central incongruity and crux of the gag (Martin's *visual* donning of a cheap prop that clearly wasn't worth the money), such verbal reiteration may simply remind us that the audience's recognition of Martin's absurdity is a slow-burning one.

While we ought to bear in mind that Martin must surely have had some standing on the comedy circuit for this gig to be recorded for television in the first place, evidence here suggests that his persona is still very much an unknown quantity. When this audience *does* laugh, it seems to be neither laughter of complete recognition nor entirely collective laughter, but, frequently, a smattering of individualized and somewhat self-conscious

laughs. Apparently quite new to his absurd brand of humour, these particular audience members seem unsure how to react to Martin. Of course, un/familiarity with the performer is a crucial determining factor in analyzing reception, and such instances of disconnection, both from Martin and amongst the audience, abound across his early career.

In the segment of the TV special which sees Martin take to the streets of Toronto and busk with his banjo, the crowd, clearly having been rounded up with some trepidation for the occasion, convey bewilderment and even suspicion in the face of this rambling guy who tells them he is playing for money to get him to Montreal. Despite the impromptu nature of this particular performance familiar intra-audience dynamics are at work: once again, a sense of conventional group identity is, on the surface, lacking, with uninitiated audience members reacting divergently and at their own pace to Martin's incongruities. Perhaps unaware of who he is (though this is doubtful in the case of the formalized performance at the Ice House), or, more likely, not yet fully 'in' on his act, these audience members, though clearly to varying degrees, somewhat 'miss' the incongruity of a self-conscious and savvy entertainer who is merely *playing* naïve. Crucially, and as I explain in due course, it is a contradictory familiarity with this central incongruity, a staunch knowingness of the separation between Martin as performer and his stage persona 'Steve', that promotes an entirely different set of responses from the later audience.

The divergent and individualized reactions we are privy to in these early gigs seem to sit problematically with any notion of laughter as contagious. In fact, when one individual does laugh, that laugh is more likely to be met with bemused silence from other members of the audience, rather than further laughter. In instances such as these suspicion and bewilderment may be directed, not only at Martin, but at fellow audience members ('Why on earth is that guy laughing?! I don't get it!'). Yet, if we extend analysis of response, as I am doing, to account for such examples of (non)laughter, what becomes apparent is precisely the contagiousness of audience response. For sure, what envelops this particular group is not collective laughter but a much more generalized sense of pleasure and belonging. Perhaps most significant about these performances, and over and above individual moments of laughter or silence, is that the majority of the audience wear broad smiles throughout. Such is the distance manufactured by Martin's often illogical comedy that they may not necessarily fully 'get' Martin at this point, nor may they even always 'get' the responses of those around them; crucially, though, they appear to be having a great time trying. If there *is* a sense of collective identity here, it is that not one of communal identification with the performer, but of a predominantly shared and bewildered intra-audience climate of 'Can you believe this guy?!'

It may be precisely Martin's disconnection from and alienation of this early audience that serves to unite them and thus to strengthen intra-audience relations. Indeed, it is this audience's heterogeneity in the face of the performer's bizarre and unfamiliar antics that

bonds them. Though they certainly convey the individualized and 'deviant' responses Marc claims the stand-up performance actively discourages, this audience may nevertheless be a more integrated force, and more complicit with one another than any simplistic or superficial analysis of their role might suggest.

Getting in on the act: Martin and the cult audience

If we fast forward a few years, audience response to precisely the same types of gags takes an entirely different form. Here, in Martin's huge concert performances, the likes of which had only previously been afforded to rock 'n' roll performers, the audience responds, rarely with actual laughter, but with loud and resounding cheering. Comedian Steve Allen has commented usefully on audience response to Martin's act, detailing a most 'unusual psychological response'. He writes:

The sort of laughter that greets Martin's witticisms, funny faces, and bits of physical business is markedly different from the simple hearty laughter most comedians evoke. It is more like the noise one hears at rock concerts, consisting of a mixture of screaming, hooting, and that particular falsetto 'Whooh', which seems to have been introduced into the language of mob psychology in the mid-1960s by girls in their early teens attending rock concerts. (Allen, 1981: 174)

Now, this 'noise' Allen refers to as quite 'unique in the history of American comedy' (*ibid*) may be seen as problematic. Constant, unyielding and non-discerning, it seems to occur no matter what, *if anything*, Martin does. For sure laughter, screams and applause may erupt simply because the performance is marked as one of a hugely successful comedian. Audience members, faced with their idol, and, further, caught up in the excitement of the gig, may find themselves unable to control their responses. Or, in the case of the uninitiated audience member (though there could not have been many of these), they may feel they *should* laugh, scream or whoop. As Limon cautions in a discussion that has resonance for the cult audience: 'Perhaps, say, a comedian has been so successful (in his routine, in his career) that your laughter is indiscriminate' (Limon, 2000: 12).

When looking to these performances at the peak of Martin's career we must be careful to recognize that this is a period where he can do no wrong. This is an audience so enamoured with Martin that they even try to copy his act and appearance. Thus, footage of fans outside one of these huge concert venues sees them dressed in familiar white suits and sporting amateur arrows-through-the-head, and is fascinating testimony to the cult status of Martin.⁶ In the BBC's documentary *Steve Martin: Seriously Funny* (1999) Martin's sister describes how she knew her brother had truly 'arrived' when she would see kids 'wrapped around the building', many wearing the familiar comedy glasses, rabbit ears and arrows-through-the-head: 'They knew his routine, forward and backward', she says. And, as Corliss notes, his

catchphrases, the famous 'well, excuuuuuse me!' and 'naaaah!', had become 'schoolyard mantras' (Corliss, 1987: no page). While Martin's props and gags originally alienate his audience, over time, then, and into these huge concert-sized gigs with a much more knowing and complicit audience, precisely the same comedy becomes the expected norm; and familiar material is received with resounding cheering. By this point in his career, the audience recognize, adore, and even emulate the material, and are entirely familiar with the comic character who delivers it. Audience response by this time serves overwhelmingly to signal membership of Martin's cult.

Now, there is clearly an issue of 'safety in numbers' here, of conduct appropriate to and facilitated by the specific stand-up space. Of course, ascertaining what individual venues provide for and permit is very much part of my project. Just as important, is to consider Martin's cult following and the much more uniformed audience responses this brings.⁷ Yet to deduce that a larger stadium crowd responds more homogenously to Martin may be too simplistic. Despite the pervasiveness of the performer/audience and intra-audience connections I outline below, we should not dismiss the fluctuating notions of dis/connection that persist in Martin's comedy, and even become more complex within this cult context. In fact, of vital significance is that the separation between Martin as performer and 'Steve', his stage persona, is much more pronounced in these later gigs, giving rise to more layered performer/audience relations than we have seen thus far. In short, the early audience are arguably responding to 'Steve', the third-rate comedian, and it is shared bewilderment at his antics that serve largely to unite the group, but to distance them from Martin. What becomes increasingly apparent, however, is that the later audience are responding to cult comedian Martin as 'Steve'. This is to say that it is precisely the audience's awareness of this split, as well as, crucially, Martin's fetishization of that very knowledge, that serves both to unite them with Martin and with each other.

A celebrated 1979 gig at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles sees Martin, now dressed in the immaculate white suit and carrying the banjo, attire that quickly became synonymous with his act, descend onstage to boisterous applause and cheering. Saying nothing but moving ostentatiously across the stage, arms outstretched in mock recognition of his rock star status, he allows the raucous reception to build. Brief establishing shots of the sizeable crowd standing and clapping are our first visual indication that this is a truly rapturous reception which shows little sign of abating. Finally, making a dismissive movement with his arms, and urging 'Go away, go away!', Martin reaches for a camera and takes a snap of the audience. It is only at this point that something resembling actual laughter can be heard, the audience responding to what is essentially the first comedic bit of the gig: the absurdity of Martin, a huge comic superstar, taking a photo of *them*. As laughter gives way to a few distinct shouts and cheers, Martin gives a purposeful 'Thank you' and raises his hands above his head, palms forward, as if indicating 'That's enough, on with the show'.

The briefest of interludes follows, punctuated only by isolated shouts from single audience members hopeful that their voice will be heard by Martin and, of course, be forever documented on videotape. You can imagine the cries of ‘That’s *me* you can hear!!’ as those attention seekers later view the gig with their friends. For the first time Martin stands still, claps his hands together as if on the cusp of something, and, in a low voice, begins with that confessional phrase ‘You know...’. What then follows is the beginning of a barely audible monologue, one that, within seconds, is drowned out by increasingly loud and collective shouts and whooping sounds. Gesturing more wildly as the audience cheer, we realize that Martin is now saying nothing, only miming words we can only guess at. We recall that the monologue preceding the arrow-through-the-head gag in the earlier gig similarly began with ‘You know’, only for the audience to respond with silence because they, in fact, ‘*didn’t* know’, *didn’t* identify with what he was saying or doing. Here, however, the much more complicit audience are responding instantaneously and riotously so, and to absolutely nothing. This is clearly Martin at play: at this point standing back from the microphone, he knows that nothing he says will be heard over the noise of the crowd. The crucial point is that he could be saying or doing anything, yet the audience simply cheer him on regardless.

Moments of apparently isolated clapping are heard on a few occasions throughout the first few minutes of the act, most noticeably when Martin turns to take a sip of water from a nearby glass, only to vulgarly spit it back out again. So pervasive are the shouts and screams that these claps are often indiscernible. However, the volume of the clapping momentarily comes to match that of the shouts and screams at a most significant moment. Here Martin begins by asking the audience:

Are tickets, were tickets, nine, nine seventy-five during the week? ... That’s not bad, really, to see a big show like this [gestures towards the practically empty stage around about him]. Um, well, with all the, eh ... [reaches out to a table on his left] props an’ everything.

With this, and a self-satisfied smile, he produces the arrow-through-the head. Now, while his pause as he moves to pick up the prop attracts brief silence, as soon as it is placed on his head the audience explode with a combination of loud cheering and clapping. (We can only assume that the audience are now clapping more quickly and vigorously for their claps to be more audible amongst the cheering.) This seems to be them at their most ecstatic and appreciative so far. And they are responding, not to Martin being conventionally clever or funny, nor merely to that absurdity the early audience only belatedly detect, but to the fact that they have seen, with their very own eyes, one of Martin’s most iconic props, and, furthermore, been the honoured butt of a cheap Martin gag. While such recognition and identification are completely at odds with the earlier bewildered response to the same

prop, once again audienceship is solidified in the face of Martin's now wholly familiar antics; the group bound together by shared and knowing pleasures.

What is further significant with this gag is the more pronounced transition between Martin as performer and 'Steve'. Certainly, the kind of conversational air Martin initially adopts here (and that recalls the similar dialogue he utilizes before donning the prop in the earlier gig) may well align him with those more observational, and, thus, relatable, comedians (spanning the family-centric Bill Cosby to the down to earth Peter Kay who attempt to strike up a rapport with the audience). In fact, we are reminded that such familiarity is a performance; and that any attempt to appeal to the audience's common experience, particularly given the extreme self-consciousness of Martin's comedy, is necessarily tongue-in-cheek. That said, however, there is a definite change in tone here, and a more noticeable separation between the voice and posturing of Martin and that of 'Steve' who, now wearing the prop, steps back from the microphone, arms outstretched and grins inanely at the audience. In fact, the separation between Martin and 'Steve' becomes even more pronounced later in the gig when Martin as 'Steve' breaks into his happy feet gag where his body, beginning with his feet, becomes comically possessed, and he dances erratically across the stage. As 'Steve', Martin's voice and mannerisms invariably become childlike, a marked contrast to his otherwise more adult and savvy musings.

Thus, though no comedian is entirely himself onstage, and, further, though the transitions between Martin and 'Steve' are fast and furious, and possibly more internalized within the overarching and thoroughly self-conscious Martin as cult performer persona than I am making out here, it is arguably Martin who converses with the audience about ticket prices, but 'Steve' who surfaces once the arrow-through-the-head prop has been adorned. Charged, as cult performer, with pleasing his audience, Martin marks the appearance of 'Steve' with appropriate aplomb; and the expectant audience respond instantaneously and riotously to the transition. Conversely, the separation between Martin and 'Steve' is much more understated in the earlier gig, and the tone of Martin's voice more consistent. The shift in comedic discourse is thus comparatively both underplayed and undetected in the early gig, with a combination of a more subtle mode of comedy and the audience's unfamiliarity with Martin accounting for delayed and hesitant response.

Martin continues to wear the prop throughout the next few gags, and is still wearing it when an initially (deliberately) faltering piece on the banjo breaks into a most accomplished performance. Familiar cheering and clapping erupt momentarily, yet we hear it gradually subside as he plays, the camera coming to fix upon a remarkably serious-faced Martin. Relative silence ensues, the audience seemingly mesmerized by his playing, and, upon his finishing, they cheer heartily. While it is extremely difficult to discern the precise nature of any of these responses, this particular bout of cheering seems to express a kind of fascinated awe. The audience knows, of course, that Martin is a talented banjo player, and

that the previous ineptitude he displays is all part of the act; yet they seem to be responding to *how* good he actually is.⁸ Though the talents are incomparable, there is perhaps a similar dynamic at work, a similar pleasurable surprise, when Martin creates his balloon animals in the early gig and later, in this gig, when he expertly juggles oranges. Here, with the banjo playing, a return to 'normality', to Martin's feigned stupidity through the performance of 'Steve', and to the audience's complicit recognition of 'Steve's' stupidity, is marked by a mixture of cheers and laughter as Martin, apparently only just noticing the prop still on his head, asks of the audience 'Did I have this on the whole time?.....Well, I must have looked like an idiot up here. [Becoming serious]. I'm sorry. I've degraded myself. And I will never, ever, wear something like this again.' As he moves to return the prop to the table, isolated boos can be heard. Yet, after a brief pause, and in response to him reaching for the infamous rabbit ears, surely another 'degrading' prop, the audience erupt with loud and appreciative cheering and clapping. Though he pauses, apparently considering whether or not to put them on, this only triggers a more raucous reaction when he finally deigns to place them on his head. Once again, the transition between Martin as performer and 'Steve' is laid bare, allowing the audience that crucial overarching connection with Martin and with one another.

What is essential for my argument, however, is that this is not to say that laughter, cheering, shouting, clapping, silence or otherwise is entirely negative as critics such as Limon might have us believe. Rather, this wide range of responses serves to stress the enjoyable sense of belonging to the group that is so acute across Martin's career. Borns perhaps gets closer to recognizing the distinctive pleasures of the medium when she notes that 'many comedians see themselves as adventure surrogates for those in the audience' (Borns, 1987: 16). She writes:

Like a group of children playing 'house', we become a single entity playing 'life', responding together to exaggerated problems that are close enough to the real thing to make the game interesting, yet abstract enough to keep it fun. We draw strength from the sense of community and comfort from the group feeling of 'me, too' (Borns, 1987: 17).

United, either by shared bewilderment ('Like *you*, I can't believe this guy!') or adulation ('Like *you*, I can't believe I'm here watching this guy!'), Martin's audiences certainly experience what Borns describes as the 'me, too' syndrome. Yet understanding and compliancy are overwhelmingly symptoms of audience members' relationships with one another. And, with the later gigs, the buffer of 'Steve' permits another discourse of compliancy. In short, Martin and his audience are now all in on the joke while 'Steve' goofs around, blissfully unaware. Thus, the audience are united with one another, and with Martin as performer, by their privileged and shared knowledge of 'Steve's' inadequacy. By now, the collective relationship with the comic performer becomes just as significant in facilitating

the pleasures of stand-up as those relationships between individual audience members. Despite, or, more appropriately, *because* of the larger, more impersonal space of stand-up, a much closer performer/audience relationship is permitted.

Further, issues of power have become almost inextricably intertwined, both performer and audience arguably displaying 'ownership' of Martin's comedy. In these later gigs, Martin very much orchestrates his audience's responses: 'It was like playing an instrument. The audience was an instrument. I can do this and they'll do *this*' (Fong-Torres, 1982: no page). That said, however, it is clear that comedy, as well as Martin, may actually be playing second fiddle here. Thus, and though I would argue that his comedy still harbours an intelligence, a philosophical stance that is much more than just being 'wild and crazy', the nuances of Martin's comedy are now overwhelmed, and are displaced by the thoroughly active and compelling input brought about by cult audienceship. Martin himself has said, 'My original act came out of a philosophical point of view. A new point of view. I was just a guy up on stage acting like a comedian' (Millner, 1989: 52). Indeed, and in possibly the most telling incongruity of his comedy, Martin's very success comes to demand that he act 'like Martin'.⁹

Performing relations: Martin and hyper self-consciousness

Even at its most manipulative, and with increasing compliancy amongst individual audience members, it seems, the fact of Martin's comedy's such *pervasive* knowingness still serves to deconstruct and destabilize traditional notions of audienceship. Part of Martin's individuality, in fact, is that he consciously parodies such loftiness and wisdom so often attributed to the comedian, and it is this, rather inadvertently, that may render him so intriguing a case study for analysis of performer/audience relations. Martin's comedy of disconnection may actually facilitate a most knowing and complicit performer/audience partnership that belies its apparent inaccessibility. By the height of his career, Martin has created a comedy that is hyper-aware, both of its audience, and of itself. As Gopnik writes:

Steve's audience was so wired in to the clichés, including the clichés of hipness and reference, that Steve could get a new kind of laughter by treating that knowledge at a higher remove, parodying the whole mechanism that produced show-business clichés in the first place – parodying the fact of entertainment itself. (1993: 102)

Aware that this is Steve in inverted commas, aware that they are an audience in inverted commas, and aware that they are being 'played', they nevertheless relish their vital role. With the free abandon of the excitable throngs who subject themselves to the pleasures of the thrill ride, the audience place themselves in someone else's hands, but willingly so. They remain an audience on edge, dependant upon Martin for their 'fix'. Yet the cult audience are now very much 'in' on the incongruity of his act. Their responses to his gags certainly still serve to convey a pleasurable and active release of tension; yet this is not a release of

tension from the occurrence of the unexpected (as we saw with the early audience where delayed laughter greets Martin's bizarre and incomprehensible antics); but often a release of tension from the occurrence of the gloriously expected.

Looking to comedy structures such as gags (the preoccupation of the prevailing criticism on film and TV comedy) and affect (clearly pertinent to reception studies, but less often discussed in relation to screen comedy), such analysis of stand-up may well animate, and intersect, studies of both comedy and audiences. In stand-up, jokes and gags, uprooted from the relative restrictions of film and TV narratives, take aim at an immediate and awaiting audience. And it is at the tangible point of their collision – the moment of (non)laughter that I argue is so fetishized within Martin's particular brand of anti-comedy – that much of comedy and audienceship may reveal itself. In its attempt to elevate the status of stand-up, to take it as seriously as other art forms, much of the criticism may actually dismiss laughter. Yet, here, I recognize laughter as simultaneously analytical tool and marker of audience gratification, for it is precisely in embracing the pleasures of laughter promoted by Martin's comedy that its complex workings may be illuminated. In a famous Martin catchphrase, he intones 'Let's get serious for a minute...'. But we might be wise not to get *too* serious or we may miss the point completely.

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Notes

¹ In the BBC's 1999 documentary, *Steve Martin: Seriously Funny*, Martin's fellow comedian and friend, Billy Connolly, deems him 'the comedy Led Zeppelin'.

² In contrast, say, to the case of the sitcom where it is commonly contrived, stand-up laughter may occur in its original, natural and uninhibited state. 'Canned laughter', inserted during the editing process, and thus added by producers after the studio audience has signalled to them where the 'best' jokes are, is intended to cue the audience at home when to laugh.

³ One biography of Martin details how he was once made to work the stage lights himself with a foot pedal, and even, in one particularly undignified (but perhaps appropriately absurd?) instance, deliver his performance standing next to a salad bar (Lenburg et al., 1980: 42-3).

⁴ Contrast this with the more formal viewing experience of theatre or cinema where the audience must necessarily wait until the end of the performance to discuss it with their peers.

⁵ Kant writes: 'Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing' (1987: 203).

⁶ In the L.A. stadium gig Martin draws humorous attention to the copy-cat props worn by his audience. After donning his he remarks conceitedly: 'It's kind of fun for me to see the people in the audience with the amateur model arrow-through-the-heads'.

⁷ The comedy album *A Wild and Crazy Guy* (1987) is useful testimony to the changing nature of audience response to Martin's work, as well as the significance of venue. The first half of the album captures part of a gig performed in front of a small audience at The Boardinghouse in San Francisco, while the second half features material from a later stadium gig at the Red Rocks Amphitheatre near Denver (a venue whose website invites: 'See the biggest stars, under the stars. Rock is better under the rock'). Plain to hear is the switch between the enclosed intimacy of the first venue, and, with this, the occurrence of many individualized and often hesitant audience responses, and the rapturous collective cheering of the large open air gig.

⁸ It never fails to please me how impressed students and colleagues are when I show them this section of the gig.

⁹ The inability to practice the kind of comedy he wished was, in part, the reason for Martin giving up live comedy and moving into film: 'comedy ... actually is too sensitive to be shouted and yelled at' (Allen, 1981: 176), he says, somewhat disparagingly.